

TO: House Human Services & Housing Committee
RE: House Bill 3191
ON: March 19, 2019

Chair Keny Guyer, vice chairs Noble and Sanchez, members of the committee,

My name is Kelly Paluso and I am a permanency child welfare worker at DHS in Portland at the Midtown Branch. I am writing today in support of House Bill 3191. I have been doing this work for 12 years. I continue to work in child welfare because I love the children and families I work with and appreciate being able to help them at one of the most difficult times in their lives. I enjoy the ongoing challenges this kind of work brings as I feel like I am able to learn something new on a regular basis. I also have a true love and appreciation for my coworkers and supportive supervisor. Without them, I would not have survived this long.

It is hard to describe a typical day in child welfare. You may go to work with a plan of home visits, court hearings, meetings and desk time to get all our paperwork done. But you always have to be prepared for the fact that any given day may not turn out how you planned. Emergencies happen regularly in this work, and most emergencies take days if not weeks to get to a manageable place. The hardest part about dealing with the day-to-day tasks at work and emergencies is the lack of time to get it all done. In my 12 years at child welfare I have never checked everything off my to-do list. I have gotten close before, but there is always something to be done. Some to-do's are more important than others, so you learn to prioritize.

Currently my to-do list is the longest it has ever been. I am a part-time employee and have 13 children on my caseload from 11 cases right now. That is equivalent to 26 children or 22 cases if I was full-time. Current staffing models suggest 11.5 cases for permanency workers, and mine is nearly double that. I continue to prioritize as much as possible, but, with caseloads this high, things are going to get missed and deadlines are not going to be met. Currently, I have concerns about figuring out how to see all the children on my caseload next month when a full week will be taken away by a trial and that simply doesn't provide enough time without working extra hours and sacrificing time with my own family.

On a regular basis I see caseworkers sacrifice vacations, time with their families, lunch breaks and so many other things in their lives for the sake of the children and families on their caseloads. How can you not? These children and their families need our help so desperately, but it comes at a cost and that is why DHS is struggling to retain and hire workers.

An audit by the Secretary of State in January of 2018 found that current challenges "compromise the division's ability to perform essential child welfare functions. These challenges include chronic understaffing, overwhelming workloads, high turnover, and a large proportion of inexperienced staff in need of better training, supervision, and guidance." My main concern in these discussions is the children we work with and that their safety comes first. When we are consistently dealing with understaffing and high turnover rates, safety might get lost and that can't be okay. To our knowledge, DHS has never been funded at 100% of the workload model since it was created in 2008.

HB 3191 is a two-part solution to tackle training and workload issues for child welfare case workers. First, the bill clarifies that DHS caseworkers need to be supported in prioritizing trainings required by the department, and in continuing their education. Second, the bill creates enforcement mechanisms to push DHS and the legislature to fully fund child welfare at 100% of the workload model, helping reduce caseloads and improve outcomes for kids and families, while also improving conditions for workers.

In the 12 years I have been doing this job, right now is one of the worst times I have experienced in terms of high caseloads, unrealistic expectations of the work given our limited capacity and resources, and the sheer difficulty of the work itself. Without a HB in place like this I don't see it getting any better either. What caseworkers do is a critical part of Oregon's promise to protect children and give families the services they need to stay together. I am asking you to pass HB 3191 in order to achieve the recommended workload model and also to assure that the workload model takes into account the increasing complexity of this job.

Thank you for your time and commitment to this issue,

Kelly Paluso, MPA
Social Service Specialist
Portland